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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the experiences of a secondary teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL) who went to Mexico and Guatemala to improve her ability to help Hispanic students new to the English language and/or to the United States. Before the project, the teacher incorporated into her ESL class the same strategies she used in teaching French, Spanish, and Japanese language classes. After her research in Guatemala and Mexico and an analysis of her journals and past lesson plans, she found that she failed to understand the composition of the class; made no connection to the students' previous learning; had no information on their previous levels of achievement; did not incorporate Hispanic studies into the curriculum; focused solely on U.S. language, culture, and history; failed to understand the diversity of Hispanic people; and taught from her own perspective, culture, and ideals. The paper shares ideas for more effective ESL teaching. (BT)

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Mexico & Guatemala

A close-up look at their ethos
as a tool to improve ESL instruction in the U.S.

Leila Meyerratken
Fulbright-Hays 2000

My research in Guatemala and Mexico focused on a series of questions aimed at helping Hispanic students who possess limited abilities in the English language, and, perhaps have limited experience in U.S. schools.

The questions I sought to address are the following:

. How can I motivate my Hispanic students to learn in my classes?

.. Why are some of these newcomers less willing to work than others, who are of the same age and nationality?

... Why are some of my Hispanic non-English speaking students unable to read or write Spanish, when other Hispanics of the same age are fluent in both English and Spanish?

.... Why were my teaching strategies ineffective with Hispanic students when they were successful with other foreign and U.S. students?

These questions have puzzled me ever since I began teaching ESL two years ago. For this analysis, it is important to note that my ESL classes are composed of various grade levels. In addition, I teach French, Spanish and Japanese to U.S. students, and I am conversant of several dialects of Arabic.

The challenge:

I volunteered to teach an ESL course each day for one class period, because our district didn't offer such a class due to lack of funding, and I wanted the opportunity to learn and render a needed service. My new class was composed of 24 students in grades 6th, 7th, and 8th. These students were mainly Hispanic, and mostly non-English speaking newcomers. The Students within the same grade level possessed various skills. For example, a 7th grade girl could not read or write Spanish, remained silent and refused to speak when called on, even to say a simple short word. She never talked to classmates, and never understood instructions, which were stated in English and Spanish, and displayed in writing on the overhead projector. On the other hand, another girl who sat next to her, same age and same grade level, was both fluent in English and Spanish. Her English was so advanced that I sought her assistance to act as a peer tutor.

In the same class period, an 8th grade boy spoke limited English, was polite, asked questions, did all his homework, and participated in class. He took pride in his work. For example, he used a ruler to make a straight line, used color pencils to illustrate, and took all the given time to complete tests and quizzes. Another eighth grade student often arrived to class late, used vulgar language, and refused to follow simple class rules such as not chewing gum during class. He talked incessantly and bothered others. Unlike most of his peers, this student was not a newcomer to class, just to the community. He has been in the U.S. for six years and his linguistic proficiency showed no improvement at the end of the semester.

Past attempts to overcome the challenge:

I wrote and won several grants to purchase all resources available to teach ESL. I taught the course using various strategies, offered hands-on activities, and included some one-on-one time with each student. I incorporated the same strategies I use in teaching French, Spanish and Japanese. I also highlighted aspects of the American culture that fascinated me as a learner of English myself. For example, I incorporated children's games, folktales, songs, and crafts like quilting. Most of these efforts showed no significance in motivating the Hispanic students to learn. On the other hand, my Japanese students embraced everything presented to them.

After the second semester, a full-time teacher was hired to teach ESL. Her position was temporary and made possible through short-term grant funds. I took the opportunity to learn from her teaching, by remaining in class as an observer only. The new teacher was a native Spanish speaker from Peru. She was organized, skilled and experienced. However, the students did not accept her, and kept asking me to take her place. They made fun of her Spanish and refused to accept her as an English teacher. This teacher, like myself, made little progress to meet the objectives we adopted from the Indiana State guideline.

After my research in Guatemala and Mexico, along with an analysis of my own journals and past lesson plans, I found that my failure to meet my own standards and objectives stemmed from the following: I

1. failed to understand the classroom composition.
2. made no connection to the students' previous learning.
3. did not have information on their previous level of achievement.
4. did not incorporate Hispanic studies into the curriculum.
5. focused solely on U.S. language, culture, and history.
6. failed to understand the diversity within the Hispanic people.
7. taught from my own perspective, culture and ideals.

The significance of understanding the Hispanic people:

In my previous experience teaching Japanese students, none of the seven listed items was necessary. On item number four, for instance, it was not necessary to integrate Japanese studies into the curriculum. For as much as I know about the culture, language, history and so forth, my Japanese students were as knowledgeable, if not more than I am. I was also confused why the Hispanic students were not as motivated as the Japanese to learn English. After all, the Japanese students were here on a temporary basis because their parents worked for a nearby automotive company, and the Hispanic students stated that they had immigrated and were here to stay. I expected the outcome to be the reverse. I wanted to know why my Hispanic students were unable to communicate even in their own language. Some of them could not spell a simple commonly used word such as "hello". They wrote *ola*, instead of *hola*. Without the "H", the word means an ocean wave.

I accepted the Fulbright Hays scholarship mainly to conduct my own research, but the program also had its own agenda, including a seminar on the Mayan people. In the beginning, I was not interested in learning about what I thought was a dead civilization,

and I was determined just to gather the data I needed to help me meet my ESL teaching goals.

Once I arrived in Guatemala, I realized that the Maya were going to be the central focus of my studies and research. The population in Guatemala is 60% Mayan, and can be referred to as "indigenous". "Indigena" is the general term for the Mayan people. The word comes from "Indian", and despite its negative connotation, it is what most people currently use when referring to the Mayan population.

The other group is called "Ladino". This term evolved after the 16th Century. Now it is used by the Guatemalan State to designate in general the "non-Indian". The Ladino population speaks Spanish, while the indigenous people represent 24 diverse groups, each with its own language. For example, there are Kiche, Ma'm and Kaq'shikel. These people face tremendous social distress that stems from blatant racism, even from the government. Many Ladinos uphold the commonly held racist views, which exist in books and textbooks. These attitudes describe the indigenous as drunk, slow, poor, stupid, and lazy. The indigenous don't hold a high level of esteem for themselves either and often repeat those stereotypes about themselves.

The linguistic diversity of the Mayan population poses a challenge to the educational system in the Guatemalan schools. Previously, the schools attempted to force all youth to speak Spanish only. They offered them an education in Spanish, but the students didn't understand the curriculum or the teachers. This system failed, and now the country has translated textbooks into all the indigenous languages. Students learn in their own language and gradually, begin to learn Spanish. By middle school the entire curriculum is taught in Spanish.

The government recruits indigenous people to train so they can teach the children in their own language, in order to facilitate learning in the maternal language. However, it is still difficult to recruit, train and retain enough teachers to meet the demand. These teachers earn $185 per month as of the year 2000, but often they quit for a better paying position.

Once, I asked a Guatemalan Ladino what a Mayan language sounds like, he stated it sounds to them like Chinese. When I heard the numbers from an indigenous student, I found that the Mayan language is glottal and contains many Arabic sounds. The written numbers are represented as dots and dashes as in the the following:

1	.	Khon
2	..	Kah-ee
3	...	U-shee
4	....	Ka-khee
5	—	Bu-u

The above numbers are Mayan, but different groups have different pronunciations. For example, number 20 is jnk'al in Chol; stob' in Tzotzil; tab' in Tzeltzal; juwinaq in Kaqchikel; junmay in Q'eqchi; wingan in Mam, and juwinaaq in K'iche. This example illustrates how distinctive each Mayan language is from another, and not a dialect from a main linguistic branch. In Arabic, for instance, each country has a pronunciation that is slightly different, but, in general, one can understand another; but this is not the case with the Mayan languages.

In terms of the numerical representation, it makes sense to the Mayan children to have dots and dashes to represent the numbers. The number six is made by placing one

dot on a dash; seven: two dots on a dash and so on. For them, learning the Arabic numerals as we know them is naturally difficult since they offer no logic as to why the number 2, for example resembles a swan.

I found this very fascinating because when I returned to the U.S. and looked at the work done by my Hispanic students, I noticed that the quiet girl who refused to talk marked her numbers using dots, which were the same Mayan system as shown above. When I inquired I found out that she was Mayan and spoke a Mayan language, not Spanish, as I had assumed. Never had I thought there would be a Mayan student in a small town in Indiana, even if I had known that Mayas still exist.

Mexico, where most of my non-English speaking students come from, is also a country where the multicultural composition is made up of indigenous people. The last census of 1995 marked that this country is occupied by 6,715,591 indigenous people. This number represents 7.4% of the total population. There are 62 groups who were identified as indigenous and are distributed throughout the country.

Mexico is made up of 31 states and the Distrito Federal, which is the capital and is equivalent to Washington D.C. The states occupied by a significant number of indigenous people are Oaxaca, Veracruz, Chiapas, Puebla, Yucatan, Hidalgo, Mexico, Guerrero and San Luis Potosi, where 84.2% of the indigenous are concentrated. In these states, there are the following groups: Nahyatl, Maya, Mixteco, Zapoteco, Hnahnu, Tsetal, Tsotsil, Totonaco, Mazateco, Chol and Mazahua who make up the majority of the indigenous groups.

This was a significant finding. My students had told me that they were from Puebla, Chiapas, and Oaxaca, but at the time, I had no knowledge of what it meant to be from those areas. Later, when I met a few of them, I found out that for most of them, Spanish was their second language, which explained their limited proficiency in this language. One of the students had lived in the U.S for almost six years, but spoke neither Spanish nor English well. Perhaps being caught between two distinctive cultures and languages made it difficult for him to master either one.

In Mexico schools also offer textbooks in all the indigenous languages, and like the Guatemalan schools, face the same linguistic challenges. Currently the Ministry of Education is striving to improve its educational system to meet the needs of all students, and, so far, they are making tremendous progress. The most significant challenges they deal with, which may or may not be caused by the linguistic barrier, are the following:
1. 15% of the students fail and must remain in the same grade for the academic year.
2. Bilingual and rural schools have a high drop-out
Other problems include:
3. Poverty and hunger make it difficult for students to sustain attention in class.
4. Drugs are becoming a concern.

Making the connection to previous learning

This is perhaps the most important element that accomplishes the goal of meeting the students' academic needs. Often we think that the child in the classroom has mastered certain basic skills, and, we teach based on that assumption. For example, when I wanted to integrate technology in my curriculum, I took my students to the computer lab to use a program called the Rosetta Stone. My Japanese students quickly and effortlessly began using the program. My Hispanic students asked me if they were going to watch a movie,

and, at the time, I thought they were joking I hadn't realized that they might not be familiar with computers.

During my expeditions to the highlands of Guatemala, I reflected on the fact that my ESL resources were composed of the most recently published curricula and books. In contrast, during my visit, I saw that the indigenous people seemed to live the same way they had hundreds of years ago. It was the striking simplicity of their daily lives that allowed me to realize the complexity and irrelevance of our teaching. For example, their modest diet staple is composed of tortillas, beans, and corn. I recalled a girl who struggled with a word from the fruit list I presented. She was unable to name the word *cherries* in English or Spanish when she was shown the picture. She didn't know what cherries were, and it was naturally a challenge to learn a word that has no meaning for her.

The resources I use contain similar words that pose a challenge for students like her, and at the same time these texts omit words that would be familiar to such a student like, papayas and avocados. Noting this doesn't mean we eliminate complex or unfamiliar words, or that we must know everything about our students' culture and background.

How could I have better met my instructional objectives to teach vocabulary that relates to food? After reflective analysis of my classroom composition, lesson plans, current resources and students' outcome, I found that it was best to avoid teaching students through translation, which is the way we usually teach a foreign language. Translation was effective for me in teaching ESL to Japanese students because they already had the background knowledge, but this same strategy failed when used with the Hispanic group.

Tips and strategies for helping the Hispanic student

An effective strategy is to teach them at the concrete level, even those in the middle or high school. For example, rather than stating that *cherries* are *ceresas*, it would be best to take students on a field trip to the grocery store, and/or bring foods for the students to sample. I found that even photos and drawings of the words from the list didn't help some of them recall the vocabulary; they needed concrete examples.

Upon returning from the trip, I interviewed nine students from my former ESL class. From this group none has been to a supermarket. They said a supermarket was expensive and doesn't carry good tortillas or other "real" Hispanic foods. One student stated that she occasionally accompanied her mother to a local *tienda*. She mentioned that her mother is beginning to go grocery shopping less frequently because she now has a job at a factory with her husband. Her mother doesn't go to the main supermarket because she cannot speak English. For this group of students, a field trip to the grocery store would have motivated them to learn about food and facilitated their understanding of the new food vocabulary.

In addition, it is not essential to focus on the quantity of words taught daily, weekly or monthly. As teachers, we feel that we must enrich students' vocabulary, and that we need to make them learn as much as possible about a certain theme. This desire is with good intentions. We want our students to communicate well in English and to succeed in our schools. However, the force-feeding system doesn't work well.

When I taught the days of the weeks, then the numbers, my students displayed no excitement to learn this new information. One year, I simply pronounced the words and had students repeat. They took notes and eventually I gave them a quiz over the list of words. Some of them, despite the daily review and practice, failed. The second year, I asked my students to create a twelve month calendar.

The second time I found that students were motivated to do the assignment- in class. I allowed them to illustrate each month by showing them a calendar from the U.S. They could illustrate it with images from their background and images from the U.S. For example, November could be illustrated with skeletons and other images to demonstrate the Day of the Dead in Mexico and images of Thanksgiving traditions in the U.S. This strategy proved to be more effective. As they learned new vocabulary, they learned about traditions in the U.S, and allowed themselves to use their own background knowledge and experience. At first I was concerned that I was wasting class time with an irrelevant activity, but on the same test, most students earned a perfect score, and no one failed.

Finding out what they already know

I found challenges teaching any topic to my students for numerous reasons such as lacking background knowledge in the topic, lack of motivation, or simply not understanding the concepts. A teacher's awareness of the students is essential, but at times difficult to accomplish. We assume that all Hispanics speak Spanish. The Mayan girl didn't attempt to speak English, rather she used the few Spanish words she knew, even after she learned how to say them in English. For example, after I gave her coloring pencils, she replied with *Gracias*, instead of saying *Thanks*. She identified more with the Spanish language and culture than English.

I find that the indigenous newcomers to the U.S. are reluctant to talk about their background. However, I found it useful to ask students specific questions such as what language do you speak at home, how many languages do you speak, and where are you from, not just the country, but the state and area.

Incorporating Hispanic Studies in the Curriculum

My Hispanic students are the most distinctive students as compared to any other nationality I have ever met. For example, they often ask to learn about Mexico. At first, this made me feel as if they didn't want to learn about our culture. While the U.S. is not my native country either, I felt that they didn't want to be here or learn what I was presenting. As a migrant child, I never asked my teachers to instruct me about my country. On the contrary, I strove to assimilate, and absorbed all the information I was given. On my own I did extra work in order to improve my English. Therefore, I couldn't relate to my Hispanic students. I even took some remarks personally when a student asked me to teach the class the Mexican states, instead of the U.S. states. Now I know that this is not to be taken personally. Hispanic students uphold strong belief in nationalism and they are proud of who they are. They are like that all the time, even in their own country.

When I was in Mexico people asked me what brought me there and how I liked their country. They awaited my response with a smile and hoped that I would be positive about my experience. On the other hand, when my U.S. students ask me what brought me here, they often do so with concern, as if I was inflicted with a bad omen that brought me

here. They make statements such as "Don't you hate it here? Isn't it boring here?" For my U.S. students the grass is always greener elsewhere. For the Mexicans, they are happy to be who they are and are in the U.S just for a better life, and not to be exposed to better scenery.

Last year, frustrated with my lesson plans and my inability's to motivate my ESL class, I picked a story to read to the class. It was a Mexican legend. I made copies and had the class, one student at a time, read it – in Spanish. The students struggled with some of the words, but, surprisingly, they were all attentive and well behaved. They were totally immersed in the story. Pleased with the outcome, I used the same legend as a basis to start a new topic. Students learned vocabulary in translation, made sentences in English and Spanish and so on.

It was an important discovery that they truly wanted to learn about their own culture, heritage and language. Knowing I couldn't just teach Mexican studies, I began to introduce a comparative study. For example, I taught the fifty states in the U.S. If they learned them very well, I would then teach them the 31 states in Mexico.

At times, I had a limited knowledge of the Mexican curriculum, so it was a good opportunity to have them research and conduct independent work. Using this strategy, students were able to understand the material better and were more likely to work.

I tried to use this technique with my U.S. students in teaching them foreign languages. For example, when I teach my students in French that the president of France holds office for 7 years, I found that they learned the material very well. Everything I teach about French culture, history, language, etc, they remembered well too. Once, a social studies teacher complained that one 8th grader wrote on his paper that the president of the US remains in office for 7 years. I realized that U.S. students at times know so little about their country that they transfer that information and assume it applies to their country as well.

I used to play a game to trick my students to assess their understanding. At times they bet me that they knew everything I taught, and they offer to buy me a Coke if they were wrong. I used to accept that offer. Once I asked a student: " The king of France stays in power for how many years?" He quickly answered: "Seven!" "Wrong!" I replied. France has no king. O.K. I prefer Pepsi." We all get a great laugh in class, and know it was a matter of listening skills and attention to details.

Now I teach using a comparative method: I say that France, like the U.S., has a president. I remind them of their system as I teach new information. I state that in the U.S, the president remains in office for four years, while in France it is seven. Teaching that way, no matter how much I try to trick the students, they always respond: "You told us they have a president? Which is it?"

The comparative method helps both groups. Although it was not necessary a motivating strategy for the U.S. group, it allows them to distinguish the differences between the two cultures and facilitate recalling the new data better.

Motivating the Hispanic Student to Learn

Realizing that I was making progress with the most challenging group of ESL learners I have had motivated me to learn more. I asked some Mexican educators what else could be done to get them to want to learn. Following is a list of some of their suggestions:

1. Find ways to incorporate Disco music. Students love that type of music, and working with the lyrics will motivate them to learn the words.
2. Teach practical information that they can use right away for a real-life setting. For example, how to apply for a job, fill out a job application, prepare for an interview, write a resume and other similar activities. This will be more likely to get them involved than teaching them the different musical instruments used in orchestra.
3. Allow students to use art. For example, teach calligraphy to create a poster using new vocabulary.
4. Teach English with Mexico (if it is the nationality of the students) as a topic.
5. Discuss topics that are familiar to the students, such as fashion, school life, and daily activities.

A Model School in Mexico

Schools in Mexico are still experiencing a challenge in retaining youth in school. Currently, it is a nationalized system, which means that all schools throughout all the states of the country use the same textbooks and teach the same curriculum. The textbooks are free to all students and cannot be obtained from a bookstore. They are distributed to all students on the first day of school free of charge. In addition, each state has its own social studies textbook to teach its local history and government. Moreover, as stated earlier, the SEP (The Ministry of Education) offers a curriculum in indigenous languages in the elementary level to meet the needs of the non-Spanish speaking population.

One school I visited, called El Centro Educativo Ixtliyollotl, has challenged itself to retain its students. It is a small school, funded by the Kellogg Foundation. It stemmed from the initiatives of a small group within the community. Its goals were to bring together students representing many diverse groups and offer them a unique and relevant curriculum.

According to the teachers from this school, 62% of the Mexican students drop out for the following reasons:
1. Extreme poverty
2. Parental ignorance
3. Single mothers.
4. Family breakdown
5. Lack of relevance of education.

This school experimented at first with only 24 students that included indigenous and youth-at-risk. Since the start of the program, the group has made remarkable progress. The days are longer than regular school days in Mexico, and the curriculum is based on three elements: academics, job training, and community leadership. The third element, community leadership, involves service learning activities.

In the morning the day begins with a gathering at the courtyard. Students start the day with music and perform a dance routine. After that they sing motivational songs that they have written the lyrics to based on the mission of the school and the students' goals.

Although the group is very large, the teachers do very little. The older students guide the younger ones with dancing and singing. They remind themselves of their goals. The gathering is very much like a Boy Scout camp when everyone meets at the flagpole

each morning. Students then return to their classrooms. However, not all learning takes place within the class. They go outside to meet with community leaders, discuss the issues that concern the community and work to meet its needs.

At 11:15 A.M, a student left the classroom. I followed her to observe and take notes. One of her student came, an adult who attends a one-on-one math class. The 14-year-old sat in a semi-vacant class with her adult student. The lady told me how much she learned math, and she wished she had a teacher who was as good as this young lady. She may have never dropped out of school if she had had that kind of help as a child.

I had the opportunity to meet several other students and talk to them individually. I was most impressed by their eloquence and their ability to express their appreciation for the school and what it has done for them. I asked the students if they would be able to go to a public school again. One replied yes, because now she would be able to succeed. This school didn't get her behind, on the contrary she is far ahead of other students of her age and grade at a regular school. Then she said she wouldn't want to return to a public school.

El Centro Educative Ixtliyollotl is private but doesn't charge students tuition. Currently it is funded by the Kellogg Foundation and the school stated that they would seek other funding opportunities as well as assistance from the community since they realized that the school will not always be funded by the Kellogg Foundation.

Conclusion

On returning from my summer research project, I have used the strategies I stated, and I was able to see a significant difference in my students. I haven't integrated service learning with my Hispanic students yet, but I plan to do so. I hope to better bridge the cultural gap between our local students and our Hispanic newcomers, very much as the Centro Educativo did.

I feel that I am only starting to acquire sufficient knowledge to improve my ESL instruction. When I sought assistance from the Department of Education a few years ago, I was given very little help. Even the workshops it offered provided no assistance. It is the reason I chose to share my findings. I hope it will be useful to other educators, and paraprofessional who are often asked to tutor non English-speaking students when ESL courses are not offered.